

research snapshot

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Remembering Aboriginal Women and Girls Lost to Violence

What is this research about?

Each year in Canada, a disturbing number of Aboriginal women and girls go missing. Many of them turn up murdered. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is working to address this epidemic. Through the Sisters In Spirit initiative, NWAC is trying to understand the violence that Aboriginal women and girls face in their daily lives. The initiative also works to honour the women and girls who have been lost to violence, and to remember those still missing. The Sisters In Spirit initiative represents a visionary philosophy for research; the families of these women and girls, as well as other members of the community, are asked to share their vision for the future. The ultimate goal is to uncover the root causes of violence and promote changes in policy that will make Aboriginal women and girls safer.

What did the researchers do?

NWAC researchers gathered information about missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Families were invited to share the life story of their daughter, sister, mother, or grandmother. In addition, families were asked to describe their experiences with the justice system, the media, victim services, and other agencies. A number of interviews, community workshops, and focus

What you need to know:

Women and girls in Aboriginal communities face an epidemic of violence. Through the Sisters In Spirit initiative, NWAC is trying to understand this violence and honour those women and girls who have been lost.

groups were held. The researchers also relied on resources such as newspapers, magazines, Web sites, trial transcripts, and court decisions.

In keeping with Aboriginal traditions, the process by which families told their stories was a collaborative one. It respected Aboriginal beliefs around ways of knowing and research. Although the interviews were somewhat structured, the families of the victims had control over the stories they shared. They continue to be updated about the activities of the Sisters In Spirit initiative. This reflects the commitment of NWAC to those most affected by violence.

What did the researchers find?

520 cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women and girls have been entered into a database created by NWAC. 126 (24%) have been identified as missing. 347 (67%) have been identified as having died as a result of homicide or negligence. There are 43 cases where the nature of the case remains unconfirmed. There are also 4 cases of suspicious death. It is unclear whether there are more disappearances now than in the past. But violence against Aboriginal women and girls remains an urgent problem. NWAC continues to conduct research so that it can add to the information about the 520 cases that are currently in the database.

It is worth noting that the violence affects mostly young women, under the age of 30, many of whom are mothers. Much of it occurs in western Canada. The majority of the families interviewed report that the justice system has not served them well.

In addition to a database, the researchers produced a report – Report to Families and Communities – which summarizes what they learned about missing or murdered Aboriginal women and girls.

How can you use this research?

Policy-makers need to recognize that young Aboriginal women, many of whom are mothers, are especially affected by violence. Active measures are needed to increase the safety, housing, and health of Aboriginal mothers. There is an urgent need to support the safety and wellbeing of infants and children. Regional differences must be acknowledged. In general, public policy on Aboriginal women and girls needs to be improved in four key areas:

1. The reduction of violence
2. The reduction of poverty
3. The reduction of homelessness
4. Improved access to justice

About the Researchers

The Sisters In Spirit initiative is a multi-year research, education, and policy initiative. It is funded by Status of Women Canada and led by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC).

www.nwac-hq.org

www.sistersinspirit.ca/

Keywords

Aboriginal, NWAC, Sisters In Spirit, Storytelling, Violence, Women

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York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

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